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ABSTRACT

A study examined teachers' training, practices, and values for using the report card to communicate their knowledge of students' literacy achievement. Subjects, 48 elementary, middle, secondary, and college preparatory teachers from 10 school districts in 5 states, completed a questionnaire designed to elicit teachers' perspectives on the report cards they used for literacy assessment. Results indicated that: (1) few teachers reported receiving any training to write report cards; (2) few were involved in the development of the report cards they were required to use; (3) teachers reported writing report cards for a wide variety of purposes and audiences; and (4) the more the report card accommodated teachers' knowledge, the more it was valued. Findings suggest that it may be difficult or impossible to build the ideal report card, within or across schools and districts. (Two tables of data are included; the questionnaire is attached.) (RS)

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Report Cards in Literacy Evaluation: Teachers' Training, Practices, and Values

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Running head: REPORT CARDS

Report Cards in Literacy Evaluation:
Teachers' Training, Practices, and Values

The report card plays a regular and prominent role in communicating students' literacy development (Afflerbach & Johnston, in press; Freeman & Hatch, 1989). Despite their importance to teachers, students, and parents, relatively little is known about report cards, including teachers' training to write report cards, teachers' practices in developing and writing report cards, and teachers' values related to the purposes and usefulness of report cards.

Recent studies indicate that teachers rarely receive adequate training in classroom assessment, and that there is a mismatch between what classroom teachers feel is important for classroom assessment, and what is taught in teacher preparation courses (Gullickson, 1986; Linn, 1990). For example, many teachers receive instruction on how to construct multiple choice tests, but few receive instruction on how to gather, use, and report classroom observational data. A result is that teachers with the prerogative to collect and use different types of assessment information in the report card may not be prepared to do so.

A study in British schools found that teachers play minor roles in developing report cards, with school administrators often controlling the development process (Goacher & Reid, 1983). In the United States, teachers also may be outsiders to the process of developing the report cards that they are required to use (Johnston, Afflerbach, & Weiss, 1990). A result is that report cards reflect the developer's assumptions of what literacy is, and how student achievement in literacy is best measured. Many report cards reflect a view of reading as an ability that can be broken into strands of performance which typically include vocabulary, decoding, and comprehension. An accompanying assumption is that students' achievement within these strands can be adequately represented by a single letter grade (Freeman & Hatch, 1989). This view may or may not be shared by the teacher (Cambourne &

Turbill, 1990).

In practice, many teachers are required to use a report card which they had no hand in developing, to write to different audiences, and for different purposes. A result is that teachers often encounter conflicts when writing report cards. Afflerbach and Johnston (in press) found that teachers faced conflicts in writing report cards when there was a mismatch between teachers' knowledge of students' literacy development, and the means of presenting that knowledge in report cards. Conflicts may also occur when there is a mismatch between students' literacy development and achievement, and the information required by a particular report card format.

In summary, a small body of research suggests that there are many potential influences on the effectiveness of report cards to communicate teachers' knowledge of students' literacy development. These influences include the amount and type of training teachers receive (if any) to be effective writers of report cards, the degree to which teachers are involved in developing the report cards they are required to use, the different audiences and purposes of the report card, and the teachers' values related to literacy instruction and assessment. The study we report here focussed on teachers' training, practices, and values for using the report card to communicate their knowledge of students' literacy achievement.

Method

Participants

Forty-eight teachers from 10 school districts agreed to participate in the study, including 34 elementary, 5 middle, 5 secondary school, and 4 college preparatory teachers. The teachers worked in schools in Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, and Wisconsin.

Materials

A questionnaire designed to elicit teachers' perspectives on the report cards they used for literacy assessment was developed for this study. Guided by our research

interests, the questionnaire focussed on teachers' professional training to develop and write report cards, teachers' actual practices in developing and writing report cards, and teachers' values related to report cards. The questionnaire is included in Appendix A.

Procedure

We sought contact people (building principals and teachers) to distribute the questionnaires to teachers who agreed to participate in the study. We requested that the teachers complete the questionnaire at a time in the school year which coincided with the writing and sending home of report cards.

Analysis of Data

Our sample consists of teachers who agreed to participate in the study. Thus we do not consider the results of this study to be generalizable to other populations. We offer the data in an effort to describe differences and similarities among the 48 teachers (and the schools and districts they work in) who participated in the study. In the next section, we present frequencies of teacher responses to our questionnaire, and use examples of individual teachers' responses to illustrate what we feel are important concerns related to report cards. Our aim is to describe teachers' training, practice, and values across the sample, and within the same schools and districts, among teachers using the same curriculum and report card. A related purpose is to suggest areas for future research on teachers' involvement in developing and writing report cards.

Results

Training

Thirty-four teachers (71%) reported that they received no training related to developing report cards, or writing report cards. The remaining fourteen teachers reported that they had three general types of training: college courses, inservice programs, and learning from colleagues. The anonymous nature of our survey did not allow for returning to the teacher sample for clarification, but none of the

teachers' accounts of training described an in-depth effort which focussed on developing, or writing report cards. Rather, the nature of training to write report cards (when it was reported) seemed cursory. For example, two teachers in Maryland reported on their training to write report cards. One reported that:

> I had a brief inservice when I was hired. This was a 1 1/2 hour lecture. (Teacher 1)

Another teacher reported:

> We have had some training, but not enough to make sure each of us are forming the same level(s) of opinion. (Teacher 2)

Some teachers reported receiving help from colleagues, although when this was reported it seemed more serendipitous than planned. One teacher in Maryland reported:

> I have received fabulous phrases that key in on specific skills and behaviors from a many yeared veteran that helps me immensely. (Teacher 3)

Another teacher reported:

> I am very fortunate to be working with a very sharing staff. We help each other through effective comment writing. (Teacher 4)

In addition to teachers' training for writing report cards, we were interested in the report card as a topic of study or discussion in teacher preparation courses. Teachers reported that this was uncommon. Only nine teachers (19%) indicated that report cards were even mentioned in either their reading methods, or educational measurement classes. For example, a teacher from Wisconsin reported:

> I have not received training specifically for writing report cards. I have had an evaluations class. This was directed mainly towards tests. The main discussion of report cards were whether or not to use letter grades. (Teacher 5)

Taken together, teachers' responses indicate that the development of report cards, and the writing of report cards are not regularly included in their teacher preparation courses, or professional education courses.

Practices

Developing the Report Card.

Few of the participating teachers (6%) responded that they were personally involved in the development of the report card. Thus, 94% of our participating teachers used report cards that they had no part in creating. Two of our survey questions anticipated low teacher participation in developing the report card, and asked teachers to identify those who were involved in developing the report card, and how long the current report card had been used. When asked who had developed the report card, teachers reported that this work was done by committees which included other teachers and administrators (38%), or exclusively by teachers (6%), or administrators (6%). Twenty-four teachers (50%) did not know who had developed the report card.

We were also interested in determining the age of the report cards in the participating districts, and teachers reported a wide range in the age of the reading/literacy report cards they used. Sixteen teachers (33%) indicated that their report cards had been revised in the last three years. Twenty-two teachers (46%) reported that they did not now how old their report cards were. Seven teachers used report cards over 6 years old (15%). The oldest report card was 18 years old, while several teachers in several districts reported that the report card was revised or developed in the past year.

Writing the Report Card.

The teachers described several diverse purposes for their writing of report cards. The most frequent purpose was to communicate students' progress, reported by 85% of our teachers. Other purposes included keeping track of student progress, providing an outline for parent teacher meetings and conversations, listing suggestions for enhancing literacy learning at home, and evaluating students' progress in relation to student's peers. The variation and frequency of teachers' reported purposes for writing report cards are included in Table One.

Insert Table One about here

The teachers reported writing report cards for a variety of audiences, including parents, guardians, siblings, relatives, students, administrators, other teachers, and school psychologists. The most frequent perceived audience was parents and guardians: 44 teachers (92%) wrote to this audience. The audiences which teachers reported writing to, and the frequency of writing to these audiences are included in Table Two.

Insert Table Two about here

We also asked teachers if they encountered difficulties when writing report cards, and a majority of teachers (68%) responded that they did have difficulties. The difficulties revolved around the format of the report card and its ability to accommodate teachers' knowledge of students' development and progress, to problems with the nature of the communication: writing report cards forced teachers to make judgments about students, and to make public the judgments. Other difficulties with writing report cards ranged from a perceived insensitivity of the report card to accurately describe students' literacy achievement, to the time-consuming nature of writing a class set of detailed report cards, to an emphasis on communicating students' weaknesses without providing adequate space for reporting students' strengths and accomplishments.

Values

Asking teachers to describe the difficulties they had with report cards provided one perspective on teachers' values. To further examine these values, we asked our participating teachers to identify strengths and weaknesses of the report cards they used. In different school districts with different report cards, teachers reported

strengths which included the report cards' ability to help teachers describe all students as achieving satisfactory or better reading levels, a teacher comments section which allowed for elaboration on a single-letter grading system (e.g., A-B-C-D-F), and report card formats which encouraged a focus on the literacy development of the individual child.

Reported weaknesses of report cards included arbitrary cutoffs for grades, because the difference between a report of "little progress" and "satisfactory progress" for a student could be quite small. Other reported weaknesses included the requirement of using a single letter grade and small teacher's comments section to describe students' achievement, the lack of space for comprehensive teacher comments, the lack of opportunity to describe integration of reading abilities into content areas, and the fact that report cards might hinder the individual relationship between teacher and student, rather than enhance it.

Teachers in the same school or district, using the same curriculum and report cards, described a wide array of values when discussing the relative strengths and weaknesses of their report cards. The following comments are from teachers within the same school or district. The excerpts highlight the relative value of the report card from the individual teachers' perspectives, and the idiosynchratic nature of the values teachers held for writing report cards.

Two teachers in the same middle school in Wisconsin made these comments related to the length and specificity of the report card:

More details could be added. (Teacher 6)

It is pretty long and detailed. (Teacher 7)

Describing how the report card accommodated their knowledge of students' literacy development, two teachers from the same New York City high school reported:

Not too well. (Teacher 8)

Excellently. (Teacher 9)

Several teachers reported that their schools used computer software programs which

offered an array of comments for teachers to choose for inclusion on the report card. Two high school teachers in New York reported:

> We are limited to comments chosen from a menu. Very often the student doesn't "fit" the menu. (Teacher 10)

> The computerized report card has set of individual comments which help explain the grade. (Teacher 11)

The preceding examples illustrate the variation in teachers' values on particular aspects of report cards within the same schools. They also help anticipate the challenges to creating report cards which meet the concerns, and embody the values of every teacher.

Discussion

The teachers participating in this study reported a wide variety of training, practices, and values related to developing and writing report cards. Few teachers reported receiving any training to write report cards, either in college courses, or as part of inservice work. It appears that report card writing may not be considered an important assessment ability, or that teachers' ability to effectively write report cards is assumed. If this is the case, we suggest that these assumptions be carefully examined. Courses in educational measurement and reading assessment often neglect issues related to communicating assessment information. Without proper training to design and write report cards, teachers who would like to be involved in the development of useful report cards may not be. When asked to communicate their knowledge of students literacy development, teachers may not achieve effective communication through the report card.

The majority of teachers participating in this investigation reported that they did not receive any training to write report cards, and that they were not involved in the development of the report cards which they were required to use. At first glance, this may seem logical: without specific training related to developing and using the report card for communicating reading assessment, teachers may not be prepared to

take on this task. Yet it is teachers who must use the report card, and the report card is most often perceived as the voice of the teacher. It is time to consider the consequences of teachers using report cards which may not reflect their values, or input. In addition, it is important to consider the peculiar situation some teachers may find themselves in: being asked to participate in designing or revising report cards, but not being fully prepared to do so. Given the reported difficulties that teachers have writing report cards, greater inclusion of teachers in the process of developing report cards may alleviate some of the difficulties. And if teachers are included to a greater degree, then appropriate training in writing report cards is needed.

In practice, the participating teachers reported writing report cards for a wide variety of purposes and audiences. Difficulties occurred when the format of the report card did not help the teachers write for their specific purposes, and to the desired audiences. The reported difficulties suggest that flexible report card formats may help teachers be most effective in communicating through the report card. For example, if a teacher is writing a report card that will be read by parents, the student, and an administrator, a format which allows the inclusion of information that is useful to all is necessary.

Our participating teachers clearly differed in the degree to which they valued the report cards they used, and what they considered strengths and weaknesses. In general, if the report card helped teachers achieve effective communication, the report card was valued. Some teachers valued report cards for the specificity they provided for describing students' literacy development. In these instances, the more the report card accommodated teachers' knowledge, the more it was valued. In contrast, teachers did not value the report card when it was not helpful in communicating teachers' knowledge. In general, if the report card did not contain enough specific information, or did not help the teacher clearly demonstrate knowledge of a particular student, the report card was not valued. Some teachers felt

that report cards were overly long, and that the task of writing lengthy narratives for each student was unrealistic, given the constraints on the teachers' time, and lack of teachers' training. Again, the idiosynchratic differences in perceived strengths and weaknesses of the report card were striking: one teacher considered a four page narrative for one student a burden, and another considered it a key to effective communication.

Conclusions

Our results suggest that it may be difficult or impossible to build the ideal report card, within or across schools and districts. This is not surprising, given the different values, practices, and abilities which teachers bring to this important aspect of literacy assessment. An attainable goal may be that the report card reflects a wide range of participation, and a wide range of values, while retaining the ability to effectively communicate students' reading development.

Within our sample of teachers, there were several commonalities. First, the majority of teachers used the literacy report card to communicate student progress to parents and students. A majority of teachers was also concerned that the report card be capable of helping them accurately describe student development, and be sensitive to individual achievements and development. In addition, most teachers were concerned that the report card meet these criteria without becoming an overwhelming task, in terms of the time required to write report cards. These commonalities suggest possible components of effective report cards, and may provide general goals for developing new report cards, or revising existing report cards.

All the teachers participating in this study used report cards, while almost none of the teachers was involved in developing report cards. We feel it is time to consider the consequences of such practice. Increased participation in the development of report cards will bring both challenges and benefits. Challenges will include the balancing of values and beliefs of many members of the educational community,

while creating report cards that serve the purpose of effectively communicating students' literacy achievement. If the report card is developed by diverse members of educational communities, the purpose, format, and message of the report card will be better understood by those who write and read them. A resulting benefit may be report cards which best reflect the values of teachers, best communicate student accomplishments, and provide useful information to the readers of report cards.

Finally, the different values, perceptions, and practices which teachers reported suggest that developing the report card is often an exclusionary process. The concerns, difficulties, and conflicts which these teachers had with report cards suggests that the development and use of report cards might be enhanced by a system which encourages participation from more teachers. Further, a system which seeks to include interested teachers might also invite increased participation from parents, and students who read report cards.

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Note: We would like to thank the teachers and principals who so willingly participated in this study.

Appendix A
Questionnaire Used in the Study

What do you feel is the purpose of the literacy report cards you write?

Who is the primary audience for the literacy report cards you write? Are there any other audiences?

What are the strengths of your report card, in terms of helping you communicate students' literacy achievement?

What are the weaknesses of your report card?

How well does the report card accommodate your knowledge of students' literacy development?

Do you have difficulties when you write report cards? If so, could you describe them?

Have you ever received training to write report cards? Please describe.

Were report cards ever a topic of study or discussion in any of your teacher preparation courses? If yes, which one(s)?

Were you involved in the development of the report card used in your school?

Who is involved in the development of the report card?

When was the report card which you use las revised, or created?

Table 1

Teachers' Reported Purposes for Writing Report Cards

Purpose	Frequency of Report	(%)
Communicate students' progress	41	(85%)
Keep track of students' progress	7	(15%)
Evaluate progress in relation to students' peers	3	(6%)
Provide an outline for meetings/ conversations with parents	2	(4%)
Motivate students	2	(4%)
List suggestions for literacy learning at home	1	(2%)
Accountability	1	(2%)

Note. Many teachers reported writing report cards for more than one purpose. As a result, the frequency of report does does not total 48, and the percentages do not sum to 100%.

Table 2

Audiences for Which Teachers Reported Writing Report Cards

Audience	Frequency of Report	(%)
Parents/Guardians	44	(92%)
Students	25	(52%)
Other teachers	18	(38%)
Administrators	13	(27%)
Counselors/School psychologists	6	(13%)
Other family members	2	(4%)
Future schools	2	(4%)
ARD meetings/EMT committees	2	(4%)
Cumulative folder	1	(2%)

Note. Many teachers reported writing report cards for more than one audience. As a result, the frequency of report does not total 48, and the percentages do not sum to 100%.